

Religion as Resistance to Resignation

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It is India's "spirituality," her constant attention to matters usually referred to as "religious," which Indian apologists regularly point to as that country's unique and outstanding contribution to world civilization. "Everything in India," they say, "is imbued with religion." But what exactly do these writers mean when they say such things? How are we, outside the fold, to assess the truth of such assertions, since we do not understand what Indians mean by "religion," and since in fact we understand only poorly our own concept of the word. Our Western dictionaries provide definitions of religion which ill-fit the Indian context, if they fit at all. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to see if a definition of "religion" in the Indian sense of the word can be found which will substantiate the above claims.

For this purpose we must avoid Western preconceptions and search Indian writings for clues. In this procedure I side with those who look to textual studies to illuminate Indian practice, and with traditional Indologists who emphasize the "big tradition" at the expense of little traditions. It is in the classical writings that are found the purest expression of India's aspirations. Emphasis on the texts, however, should not preclude the checking of our findings with contemporary village attitudes and practices. In recent years, some anthropologists have voiced suspicion of "literati" interpretations of Hinduism; it seems equally justifiable to suspect the reports of villagers, who are notoriously unclear as to the origins of their beliefs. The proper course is surely the interpretation of village lore as approximations to a norm identifiable by consulting authoritative scriptures.

Among the major texts of the great tradition of Hinduism, the *Bhagavadgītā* rightly deserves major attention. Western students of India are constantly frustrated when they try to gather from this poem the essence of Indian religion, and recently they have had a tendency to deplore Krishna's teaching as maverick and to find special explanations for its popularity. Yet it seems to me that Krishna's teaching provides a direct means of understanding the essence of Indian spirituality if we are not hampered by our preconceptions. Briefly I wish to set forth what I think is the heart of Krishna's philosophy and to suggest some of its implications and applications for the understanding of the Indian scene.

As is well-known, Krishna advises Arjuna to adopt an attitude of non-attachment to the fruits of his actions. Arjuna thinks he has to choose between action and inaction. If he acts and fights, he will destroy the most basic of all institutions, the family, for on the other side of the battle lines are ranged many of his kinsfolk. If he does not act, he will produce the same result in another way, for if he fails to fight, the Kauravas will probably win, and righteousness (that is, the inheritance of the kingdom by the Pandavas) will not prevail. Yet, at least if he does not fight, he cannot be held responsible for the actual destruction of traditional institutions, and so he lays down his arms.

Arjuna's dilemma has nothing to do with activism or pacifism. He does not propose to request or, by his example, to persuade everyone else to lay down his arms. The war will take place whether he takes part in it or not. The question is one of individual ethics, not the ethics of society. In Hindu thought, societies are not conceived of as making decisions. Instead, individuals make decisions, and their decisions are measured against the requirements of religiosity.

For an understanding of Arjuna's dilemma, one basic point must be kept in mind: namely, that Arjuna assumes that the traditional institutions must be maintained. Family, caste, society as they existed before this awful battle must be maintained if possible, but the apparent impossibility of maintaining them causes Arjuna to be afraid.¹ But why should it matter whether traditional institutions are maintained? Here the Western reader has difficulty in imagining the full pressure of Arjuna's dilemma. The maintenance of the family is not that important for us today, and as for caste distinctions

the Westerner not only places little value in them, he believes they should be abolished. The difference between Western assumptions and Arjuna's assumptions on this point is, I believe, crucial. We tend to think of institutions (such as the family or caste) as agencies for obtaining goods for the collective membership, whereas Arjuna looks upon these institutions as organizations for protecting the potential for freedom of each participating member.

Here, if I am correct, is the key to the connection between the esoteric philosophy of the *Gītā* and the popular attitudes of ordinary Indians; the key is this conservative attitude toward institutions. Hitherto many writers have noted the strong role tradition plays in Indian society, but to my knowledge no one has suggested before that spirituality or religiosity in India consists precisely of this attitude of upholding tradition. It is my belief that this attitude constitutes a large part of the essence of religion in Hinduism.

If this assumption is correct what is the relevance of Krishna's instruction? Why should the attitude of non-attachment to the fruits of one's actions be regarded as deeply religious when religiosity is defined as the maintenance of institutions? For an answer to these queries we must first recall that the original philosophy of the Vedic peoples turned on the idea of sacrifice to gain power. Again, the Western scholar finds it difficult to dissociate the idea of power from that of goods-seeking; for him the powerful man is one who owns much land or money, or who wields much influence in securing advantages for himself and for those who serve him. But from the Indian point of view a person might hold such material wealth and exercise such influence and yet be a person of very little power in the special Indian sense of the term. In this latter sense a man who is at the mercy of "internal" limitations is a man of little power regardless of his wealth and political hegemony. Although in the Upaniṣads the sage Yajñavalkya is always asking for cattle as his prize for answering questions correctly, such an example may be misleading. The power that the Indian tradition venerates is that of the man with capacity for knowledgeable and discriminating action. Whatever enlarges a man's vision and capacity for incisive action is *dharma*; whatever blocks his vision and stultifies his capacity is *adharma*. Krishna's message is perfectly in consonance with this view; it is precisely his thesis that goal-seeking attitudes block one's vision and stultify one's capacity for discriminating activity.

By seeking goal-objects we make ourselves dependent upon their attainment, and in so doing we lose full control of ourselves. Being therefore unable to see situations fully and clearly, we can, as a result of our desires, be used by others for their devices. But if we refuse to allow desires to obscure our vision and limit our capacity for spontaneous action, we maintain power. Thus the adoption of an attitude of non-attachment to the fruits of actions is the logical advice for Krishna to give.

Insofar as we allow ourselves to become controlled by our desires for objects, we resign ourselves to dependence upon other objects and other people.² By resisting this resignation, we maintain our capacity to know and act intelligently. And this attitude of resistance to resignation, this "vigilance" as the *Gītā* puts it, is recognized by Indians at large as the essence of spirituality. Hinduism celebrates this attitude, and is undermined by anything which frustrates it.

This, then, is the message of Krishna, and, if I am right, the basis of Indian religion. As a philosophy, it has many conservative features. It postulates an original state of complete power (self-possession), and tells us that over the years men have fallen away from that state (*viz.* the well-known theory of the four "eras" [*yuga*]).³ Moreover, this philosophy limits the proper function of institutions to a negative role, that of protecting the individuals from temptations to resignation. Arjuna, a product of orthodox Hindu thinking, presupposes that institutions must be maintained because institutions properly function to preserve what remains of the original power in men against the continual onslaught of evil desires and hatreds.

And yet it is by those very same institutions that power is destroyed. For institutions are two-faced: good men submit to them to preserve their power, but evil men use institutional affiliations to seek goals, and thus institutions breed resignation. Goal-seeking and surrender to desires by some people cause the religious zealot to stiffen his hold on tradition, an attitude which will brook no deviation from the procedure which enabled these institutions to maintain the power of each of their members to retain full control of himself.

What sort of institutions am I thinking of? The family and caste institutions come quickly to mind. These are natural institutions

which grew out of the need to establish an individual's role among other people in such a way that he was provided with the minimum physical needs for survival while leaving him spiritually free to concentrate on self-improvement. With such objectives the village divided itself into units, each of which had different roles to perform. A village which functioned harmoniously was one which provided each of its individuals maximum opportunity to attain spiritual betterment. An individual grew up within institutions comprehensible to him and whose changes he could predict. By anticipating changes he could avoid threats to his welfare. Being thus provided with a minimal standard of living, he desired no more. Indeed, to desire more would be irreligious, since desires are symptomatic of resignation, that is, they represent relinquishment of control over oneself to external factors. This belief explains the critical attitude of the orthodox Hindu to the artificial institutions of contemporary society.

Despite this critical attitude, orthodox Hindus continue to form new institutions. New institutions are formed when individuals are threatened, and the orthodox Hindu today is very much threatened by democratic, welfare-seeking institutions. Just as the family existed to serve basic needs, so the rationale of the caste was to provide for minimal living. Today the Jan Saugh exists to protect Hinduism from erosion by modern social ideas.

If the heart of Indian religion be this resistance to resignation (to domination by other things or persons), then what may be said of the external manifestations of religion, the worship of gods, animals, and men? I think that two factors are involved in these manifestations. One is the idea of divinity, of pure power, manifesting itself in certain individuals or gods who thus deserve reverence and emulation. The other is the function of divinities as symbols to which to pray for succor. These two factors are of completely different orders. The expression of reverence for superior beings stems from the power philosophy which I have identified with Indian religion. The need for the projection of symbolic entities to which to pray stems from a quite different source which I would describe as "medical." I need not rehearse the well-known origins of such ideas in primitive superstitions, nor can I here review the data which anthropologists have collected on the folkways of primitive tribes in India, or the speculations of specialists concerning

the growth of such beliefs through the years. Nevertheless, spectators of the Indian scene have regularly identified these two aspects of Indian religious practice as jointly generating "Hinduism." In part, as I have tried to suggest, the failure to distinguish between these two distinctly different concepts is due to the application to India of Western preconceptions. However, this is not the whole problem, for there are connections between the medical and the resistance-to-resignation conceptions of religion.

One connection stems from the willingness of the guardians of the resistance-to-resignation concept of religion—the Brahmans—to make use of any and all popular beliefs to help instill and reinforce religion among the common people. The Brahmans did not live on an ethereal plane far removed from the ordinary folk and their more or less primitive superstitions. Instead these clever, innovative priests quickly seized any movement arising among the common people and used it to illustrate their tenets of proper Hinduism. Rarely indeed did these priests allow an anti-Hindu movement to gain any momentum. Besides being expedient policy, this assimilation of rival views was dictated by the logic of the Brahmans' philosophy which was to avoid creating stress among individuals, for stress was likely to breed those goal-seeking attitudes which undermine the power of everyone involved. As a result of this assimilation, Hinduism to the external viewer appears to have differing forms from one age to the next. For instance, the Vedic sacrificial cult, the classical philosophy of *mokṣa* or *Nirvāṇa*, and the *bhakti* cults of medieval times may seem, instead of different manifestations of a common spirit, the successive developments of differing local traditions. However, I hope to have suggested here that there is a common philosophy underlying these various manifestations, that the root attitude remains the same, even though the form under which the philosophy shows itself from age to age may differ.

It is important not to confuse these two types of religious manifestation, for worship in the primitive or "medical" sense may be inimical to the concept of resistance-to-resignation. The primitive man prays for succor in the same spirit with which he would go to a doctor if he knew one whom he could trust. His prayers are offered in situations which are beyond his control but in which he would take action if he possessed the requisite knowledge and capability.

As long as what is at stake is the means to minimal livelihood, religion as resistance to resignation has no objection, for this latter philosophy is put into practice only after a minimal standard of living has been attained. As soon as men start asking their gods for more than the minimum, however, the conceptions of religion as medicine and of religion as resistance to resignation diverge sharply. When one prays for more than one needs, one is confessing his desire for objects as well as his inability to attain these objects by means available to him. The concept of "minimum standards" varies from individual to individual and is dependent upon one's stage of spiritual advancement. However, the point is that the "medical" approach to religion is consonant with goal-seeking, while the attitude of resistance to resignation is opposed to goal-seeking. Confusion arises when the term "religion" is applied to embrace both of these types. Yet nearly everyone who has written in Western languages about Indian religion has made this mistake.

If we choose to distinguish between these two attitudes, then I think we would not say that "everything in India is imbued with religion." I have tried to suggest that an appeal to gods for material betterment beyond the requirements for survival would be antithetical to the true Indian conception of religiosity. As long as we continue to amalgamate the medical and resistance-to-resignation attitudes, our understanding of the true thrust of a particular Indian religious movement will remain unclear. This lack of clarity has enabled exponents of India's spiritual superiority to distort India's past by posing Hinduism in Western terms. As a result, Westerners who have not studied India carefully have become convinced that all Indian philosophy is mystical, that Indians at large spend more time in spiritual exercises than other peoples, that the general Indian attitude is "other-worldly" or "world-negating," and so forth. But each of these beliefs is even less than a half-truth, applicable only to a small proportion of Indians past or present.

NOTES

1. See *Bhagavadgītā*, I, 28 ff.

2. The special sense of "resignation" understood here is discussed in more detail in my book, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 15-19.

3. According to one version of this bit of Indian mythology, each cycle of creation, lasting for millions of years, follows a pattern wherein men begin with their *dharma* perfected, and proceed gradually to lose their *dharma* until eventually they arrive at the fourth age, our age, in which men have only one quarter of their original *dharma* left. See, e.g., Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Pantheon Books: Bollingen Press, 1946), pp. 13-14. There are many versions of this myth, some widely different from this one.